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# The dramas of Byron : an evaluation

Welford Dunaway Taylor

# THE DRAMAS OF BYRON: AN EVALUATION

BY

WELFORD DUNAWAY TAYLOR

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Approved for the

Department of English

and the Graduate School by

Edward C. Pepa
Director of Thesis

Louis F. Ball
Chairman of the English Department

B. C. Holycross
Dean of the Graduate School

# PREFACE

Although the dramas of Byron are insignificant so far as the whole of his literary output is concerned, they nevertheless give an important insight into the character of Byron the artist. It is Byron's purpose for writing the dramas themselves that is important to the student of Byron.

The nineteenth century was faced with a dearth of good drama, and Byron realized this. He attempted to fill this void with a type of drama which he hoped would revolutionize the English stage. He thought that drama which was a return to the spirit of the Greeks would be the answer, and he undertook to write drama based on Greek models. However, his talent was not for the theatre, though it was difficult for him to accept defeat on the stage. After he realized that his idea of drama would not be successful, he reversed his intention and produced one last drama, Werner, which was full of mystery and gothic horror--what nineteenth century audiences liked. Paradoxically enough, this proved to be his best play structurally, and the only one successful on the stage.

He tried to say that he had never wanted success on the stage--that he had been writing for a "mental theatre"--but his efforts were in vain. I trust that this study will reveal that so far as his carrer as a dramatist is concerned, Byron was a disappointed idealist who tried every way he knew how to disguise his defeat.

W. D. T.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## BYRON AND THE THEATRE

Byron's career as a dramatist is not an outstanding aspect of his fame when the "Byronic legend" is viewed as a whole. Byron was first and last a poet, and he is always considered as one. How, then, are we to differentiate the dramatist from the poet? The answer is quite simple: In his career as a dramatist, he never ceased to be a poet. Therefore, we must consider this phase of his career mainly as a segment of his poetic career, for all of his dramas were poetic.

A distinction can often be drawn between "poetic drama" and "dramatic poetry," but with Byron this distinction is practically impossible. It is not so difficult to establish it in Werner, but this drama is a definite exception in many ways, for Werner has more theatrical possibilities than do his other dramas.

Accepting the general estimate that the dramas are basically poetry, it is logical to ask why Byron, already an established poet, undertook to write drama. To explain this, two factors must be considered: (1) The interest that he had shown in the theatre before he undertook drama, and (2) certain major events in his life which warranted poetic treatment and which could be advantageously expressed in a dramatic form, the events being dramatic in themselves.

Byron was always an avid theatre-goer. When he was only five,

his nurse took him to the theatre to see The Taming of the Shrew. He watched the performance quietly until the scene between Catherine and Petruchio where Catherine says:

I know it is the moon.

and Petruchio answers:

Nay, then, you lie; it is the blessed sun,

Here the lad jumped from his seat and boldly cried out, "But I say it is the moon, sir."[1]

At Harrow the boy found a more orthodox means of delivering a speech to an audience. On July 24, 1804, his mother wrote to a friend of a recent report she had received of a speech her son had made to the school [July 5, 1804], and that he had "acquitted himself uncommonly well."[2]

The following year there were similar speeches. Dr. Joseph Drury, then headmaster at Harrow, foresaw a career in oratory for the boy.[3] For his subjects Byron chose Lear's address to the storm and Zanga's speech over the body of Alonzo, from Young's tragedy, The Revenge. Both these express vehement passion.[4]

It is said that Byron's speaking debut at Harrow was his first

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[1] Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., editor, His Very Self and Voice, p. 3.

[2] Rowland E. Prothero, editor, Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, II, 27.

[3] Ibid., p. 29.

[4] Ibid.

taste of the sweets of applause.[5]

Byron has given a rather complete picture of his histrionic exploits in Detached Thoughts. In 1821, reflecting on his formative years, he writes:

> When I was a youth, I was reckoned as a good actor. Besides 'Harrow Speeches' (in which I shone) I enacted 'Penruddock' in the 'Wheel of Fortune,' and 'Tristram Fickle' in Allingham's farce of 'the Weathercock,' for three nights (the duration of our compact), in some private theatricals at Southwell in 1806.[6]

He composed "the occasional prologue for our volunteer play," and it seems that Byron and the young ladies and gentlemen of the neighborhood who performed with him enjoyed success.

Two years later, in 1808, he decided to "get up a play here at Newstead." The play was Young's The Revenge, and he chose to play the part of Zanga, which he had recited in part some years before at Harrow.[7]

It is pertinent to include the two speeches Byron made in the House of Lords in 1812 as part of his theatrical career. He was evidently still of the opinion that his aristocratic audience would appreciate the same type of oration that his schoolmates at Harrow had, and his delivery was criticised as being "too theatrical and

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[5] David V. Erdman, "Byron's Stage Fright: The History of his Ambition and Fear of Writing for the Stage," JELH, (September, 1939), 219-243.

[6] Letters and Journals, V, 445.

[7] Erdman, op. cit. p. 225, states that "he now wanted to relive that triumph with a full company."

sing-song."[8]

In 1814 the "youth" of the Waiter's Club (of which Byron was a member) put on a masquerade for Wellington and Company. The next year, when Byron was on the Sub-Committee of Drury Lane, the same masquerade was given by a company of professionals. Byron, Douglas Kinnaird, and "one or two others" put on masques and went on the stage with the masquers. Byron wanted "to see the effect of a theatre from the stage." He remarked, "It is very grand."[9]

To many commentators on the somewhat sporadic "theatrical career" of Byron, the events just mentioned could show a trend of growing enthusiasm--rising from minor theatricals at Harrow to an aspiration to the Drury Lane stage. Although these "performances" were never more than amateurish infatuations, and perhaps are of little consequence when considering the life of the man, when considering Byron as a writer of drama, these events do show a sustained interest in histrionics in general, and Calvert has very aptly remarked that "his attitude toward the theatre was partly that of an amateur actor."[10]

What Erdman cites as Byron's final attempt at acting occurred at Pisa. He was trying to get up a performance of Othello. He later re-

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[8] Dictionary of National Biography, III, 590.

[9] Letters and Journals V, 444.

[10] William J. Calvert, Byron: Romantic Paradox, p. 155.

lated the event to Medwin, who wrote of it: "Lord Byron was to be Iago. Orders were given for the fitting. . .rehearsals of a few scenes took place. . . . All at once a difficulty arose about a Desdemona, and 'the Guiccioli put her veto on our theatricals.'"[11]

All of the previously mentioned events reveal Byron's interest in the theatre, but it must be pointed out that they all have one thing in common: every one of them was a conscious contrivance on Byron's part. Although they give definite proof of his interest in the theatre, they are perhaps not as revealing of his true dramatic nature as a certain event which was definitely not contrived. On one occasion, when Ticknor was visiting Byron, and the conversation turned to the theatre, the latter imitated perfectly the manner of Munden, Braham, Cooke, and Kemble, "while affirming his enthusiasm for the theatre."[12]

These illustrations cover many years. Indeed, Byron, even in his exile, showed a love and an interest in participating in the theatre.

However, Byron's love of drama can be seen in certain aspects of his life which are not related to the theatre. It has been said that "circumstances made a dramatic figure of him."[13] This seems a fair statement. In his formative years he developed a certain self-conscious-

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[11] Erdman, p. 226, quoting Thomas Medwin, Conversations of Lord Byron, I. 141.

[12] Calvert, p. 155.

[13] J. Stephens, E. L. Beck, and R. H. Snow, editors, English Romantic Poets, p. 233.

ness that he never lost. His mother's attitude toward him was changeable--ranging from warmest affection to heartlessly branding him with the epithet "lame brat."

Byron was very self-conscious about his deformed foot, and could not tolerate such treatment. In order to defend himself from such criticism he developed a definite sense of superiority. This sense of superiority was enhanced in 1798, when he became the sixth Lord Byron. He always kept this superior concept of himself. He was criticized for many things as his life progressed, but his sense of superiority always served as a means of defense. In Canto III of Childe Harold he wrote:

> He who ascends the mountain tops. . .
> Must look down on the hate of those below.

This was always the attitude of Byron the man, and most especially that of Byron the dramatist.

By 1805, the year Byron entered Cambridge, (he was seventeen) this feeling of superiority was firmly fixed in his character. He protected this superior feeling by participating in sports such as swimming, riding, and fencing, where his defect would not be noticed as easily. More significantly, he began to write poetry. His Hours of Idleness was published in 1807. Because Brougham, in The Edinburgh Review, slashed out so at this volume, Byron later the same year began to strike back by beginning a satire of contemporary literature entitled English Bards and Scotch Reviewers. This attracted some public attention.

Byron graduated from Cambridge in 1808, and in July, 1809, he and

John Cam Hobhouse, a college friend, set out on an extended tour of the Near East. This was a romantic expedition in every sense of the word; it included such feats as swimming the Hellespont and writing a passionate lyric to Teresa Macri, a fifteen-year-old girl in Athens (i.e. "Maid Of Athens").

When he returned, in July, 1811, he brought with him the first two cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, which, when published, brought him immediate fame.

He was handsome; he was a popular poet, an experienced traveller, a member of the House of Lords, and he achieved inevitable popularity in London society.

It is at this point that Byron's career was pointed toward the theatre.

Drury Lane Theatre had burned on February 3, 1809, and it was reopened in the autumn of 1812. In August of the latter year a contest was sponsored to select an address to be delivered at the reopening. Lord Holland suggested that Byron enter the competition, but he declined, saying,

> Under all the circumstances, I should hardly wish a contest with Philodrama--Philo--Drury. . . and all the antonymes and synonymes of committee candidates. Seriously, I think you have a chance of something much better; for prologuizing is not my forte, and, at all events, either my pride or my modesty won't let me incur the hazard of having my rhymes buried in next month's magazine.[14]

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[14] Letters and Journals, II, 141.

More will be said later concerning Byron's refusal to compete. However, all his fears of competition were appeased, because all the addresses received were rejected, and the committee sponsoring the contest approached the popular young poet requesting him to write an address suitable for the opening. He wrote an address seventy-three lines, in couplet form. It was spoken by Robert William Elliston, a Drury Lane actor, who was Byron's first choice as a "good deliverer."[15]

This was an important opportunity for Byron. From his offhand reaction to Lord Holland's first request he now became very much concerned about the success of the address, and after suggesting the proper actor to deliver it, he communicated with Lord Holland in great detail about certain passages and even single words.

The address was delivered on the evening of October 10, 1812. James Perry, in the Morning Chronicle, on October 12, 1812, reviewed both Elliston's delivery and the address very harshly. Byron was hurt, of course, and he chose a very clever means of making light of his injury. Dr. Thomas Busby had entered an address in the competition, and on October 14, just two days after Perry's slashing article appeared, Busby's son attempted to force his way onto the stage and give his father's address. Byron seized this opportunity to save face. He wrote a parody of Dr. Busby's address called Parenthetical Address, and signed it "Dr. Plagiary." This served to make light of one of the rejected

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[15] Ibid., II, 146.

addresses to the public and thereby gain more sympathy for Byron. He requested Murray to get "this Parody of a peculiar kind" put in several of the papers, "particularly the Morning Chronicle," and as a professional gesture, to smooth his hurt pride he added, "Tell Mr. Perry I forgive him all he had said, and may say against my address."[16]

Poetic triumphs such as The Corsair, The Giaour, The Bride of Abydos, and Lara continued throughout 1813 and 1814. He took Lord Salisbury's box at Covent Garden for the 1813-14 season. He was now very much a part of the high society of London. Never stooping below the plateau of the aristocrat, Byron had never accepted payment for any of his poetry. But at this point it was necessary for him to face the realities of waning finances. Even Newstead Abbey, part of the endowment that accompanied his title, had to be sold because he was unable to pay the heavy mortgages that were attached to it.

As a possible means of alleviating his financial strain he began to think of marriage. In 1812 he had proposed marriage to Anne Isabella Milbanke, but was refused. However, shortly after this refusal she began a correspondence with him on her own accord.[17] In a rather frivolous mood he proposed again, and she accepted. They were married on January 2, 1815. His marriage has rightly been called "the most fate-

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[16] Ibid., p. 176.

[17] George Brandes, Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature, in Naturalism in England, p. 283.

ful event of his life."[18]

The entire year 1815 was an important one in shaping Byron's career as a dramatist. After his marriage, Byron soon spent his wife's dowry to appease his debtors. The sum of £18,000 quickly disappeared. Things became so bad that he finally had to sell his library. With false pride he refused an offer from John Murray, his publisher, of £1,500 remuneration for his writings. It was logical that Byron should get a job. His friend Douglas Kinnaird, knowing his interest in the theatre, requested that be become a member of the Drury Lane Committee of Management. He was appointed probably in May, 1815. Kinnaird made over to him a share of £500 "in order that he might vote."[19]

Augusta Leigh, Byron's half-sister, who stayed with the Byrons at Picadilly Terrace from April to June of that year, wrote to Byron's friend Hobhouse, "At first it [the job] struck me as a good thing, employment being desirable, but as in other good things, one may discover objections."[20] The "objections" were realized only too vividly before Byron's short service as a committeeman was completed.

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[18] Idem.

[19] Leslie A. Marchand, Byron, II, 532.

[20] Ethel Colburn Mayne, Byron, p. 214.

Byron shared his post with Lord Essex, George Lamb, Douglas Kinnaird, and Peter Moore. Samuel Whitbread was the theatre manager, and Perry Whitbread was stage manager. Lady Byron, who had at first looked on the position as one of great prestige, wrote her father shortly after her husband's appointment:

> Drury Lane opens on Saturday--I don't much like the concern, and I believe it is the general sentiment, as far as regards Byron's share of it. Lady Hardwicke told me it was only fit for a six and eight penny man--and it seems to involve a species of business & attendance which I did not foresee. In short it is the vocation of an Acting Manager--to superintend the candle-snuffers, lecture the performers, etc.[21]

However, though Byron had some lowly duties, he also had some very responsible ones. He tried to get new talent, both in acting and playwriting. For the latter he was obliged to read some five hundred plays which had been submitted to be considered for performance at Drury Lane. This was no pleasant task for one who had stated some time before, "Congreve and Vanbrugh are your only comedy. Our society is too insipid for the like copy."[22] Later he said to Thomas Moore ". . . as it is fitting there should be good plays now and then. . . I wish you or Campbell would write one."[23]

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[21] Ethel C. Mayne, The Life and Letters of Lady Byron, p. 189.

[22] Letters and Journals, II, 398.

[23] Ibid., III, 81-82.

It has been rightly said that "audiences were rough in those days and their tastes vulgar."[24] Being in intimate contact with the theatre, Byron most definitely realized the situation and tried to remedy it somewhat. He appealed to Moore without success, and then to Scott. Scott himself did not comply, but suggested Charles Robert Maturin, an Irish novelist and playwright. Byron succeeded in obtaining Maturin's Bertram, and it was produced with much success in 1816--after Byron had left England.[25]

Remembering Coleridge's Remorse, Byron appealed to him for another play. He finally complied, with Zapolya, but it was never produced because he refused to make certain revisions which the Theatre Committee asked him to. Byron, having read William Sotheby's published dramas, obtained Sotheby's Ivan instead.[26]

But so far as comtemporary dramas went, there was still the dearth that Byron had spoken of previously; and at this point, while in constant contact with the theatre and some of the finest actors of his day, he realized that the time was right for a new dramatist to emerge and capture the field. In 1814 he had said,

> I wish that I had a talent for the drama; I would write a tragedy now. But no,--it is gone. Hodgson talks of one,--he will do it well;--and I think m[oor]e should try. He has wonderful powers, and much

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[24] Allardyce Nicoll, World Drama from Aeschylus to Auouilh, p. 413.

[25] Marchand, II, 542.

[26] Letters and Journals, III, 62.

variety; besides, he has lived and felt.[27]

Later the same year he had written from Newstead to Murray, his publisher, "Just before leaving town, Kemble paid me the compliment of desiring me to write a tragedy; I wish I could, but I find my scribbling mood subsiding."[28] However, in March, just two months before his appointment to Drury Lane in May, he was once again saying (this time to Coleridge) that "there was never such an opening for tragedy."[29]

Thus, the need seemed ever-present to him, but he had to be sure of success, and because of his uncertainty had professed that he was not the one to reform the stage. He had praised Maturin's Bertram. It has been described as "a play of the most widly Satanic Character, dealing with crimes of primitive magnitude, with terrific storms and equally terrific blood-shed."[30] If this was what the contemporary audience wanted, it was simple enough to supply, and Byron set to work secretly on just such a drama. It was Werner, a tale of Gothic horror which would have undoubtedly pleased theatre audiences of his day. He admits that he had completed "nearly an act" when he was "interrupted by cir-

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[27] Ibid., II, 387.

[28] Ibid., III, 16.

[29] Ibid., III, 191.

[30] Martha Fletcher Bellinger, A Short History of the Drama, p. 303.

cumstances."[31] These "circumstances" not only changed his whole attitude toward drama, but his whole mode of living as well. The "objections" which his half-sister had considered began to reveal themselves. Lady Byron was pregnant, and she wanted to go to the country for her accouchement, but Byron was far too engrossed in the affairs of Drury Lane to accompany her. He wished her to go by herself, but she would not. Finally, financial difficulties arose which would have made it impossible anyway. Also 'milord' was too fond of his own pleasures,[32] which included a lot more than his theatrical duties. A scandal was later raised about his conduct with some of the actresses, especially Mrs. Mardyn.

In the first place, Byron's marriage was not one built on relations conducive to happiness (as we would interpret it in the conventional sense). It was a marriage of convenience: for him, her money and rank; for her, his popularity and intellect. Now, in the progressing stages of Lady Byron's pregnancy, domestic relations were becoming more and more strained. Byron was given to violent fits of passion, and his heavy drinking caused him to behave most irregularly. Augusta returned to the household in November, and on December 10, Lady Byron gave birth to a daughter, Ada Augusta, named for her father's half-sister.

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[31] Ernest Hartley Coleridge, editor, The Works of Lord Byron, V, 338 (Preface to Werner).

[32] Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660-1900, p. 71.

The succeeding events are widely discussed ones, but just what caused them is a matter of conjecture, and certainly no commentator has spoken of them without some prejudice. At any rate, after the birth of the child, Byron and his wife lived under a sort of estrangement, but there was no indication of what was to come. Lady Byron took her child to Kirkby to visit her mother. She was never to see her husband again. Soon thereafter a formal separation was decided upon. As mentioned above, the real reason for the separation is not known. Byron, being such a popular public figure, was naturally the victim of much criticism. Many had been jealous of his fame and seized upon the opportunity to blast his reputation with scandal. The most popular story is, of course, that he was guilty of incestuous relations with his half-sister, Augusta, but there is no definite proof of this, and, as has already been mentioned, it is best to be wary of prejudiced commentators' views on the subject. One might just as easily believe that it was because Lady Byron thought her husband was mentally unbalanced, as she later said that she believed him to be.[33]

Thus the young poet who was avidly interested in drama and who had been in the perfect situation to write for the theatre was in his first attempt interrupted by domestic difficulties. These difficulties led to his leaving England, and, of course the theatre he had known there. On

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[33] Letters and Journals, III, 288, quoting Moore, Life of Byron, pp. 661-663.

April 24, 1816, he "shook the dust of England from his shoes,"[34] never to return again.

The bulk of his dramatic writing was to follow, but it would not be in England. The first step of his journey was to Geneva. There he met Shelley, and there he began Manfred, his first completed drama.

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[34] John Drinkwater, The Pilgrim of Eternity, see illustration facing p. 256.

## CHAPTER TWO

## THE DRAMAS AND THEIR COMPOSITION

A great friendship began when Byron and Shelley met in Geneva. Much of the time that Byron spent in Switzerland was with the Shelleys. His stay lasted four months and three weeks, and it was a period of busy poetic activity. During it he composed the greater part of the Third Canto of Childe Harold; completely wrote the Prisoner of Chillon, with its seven attendant poems; wrote the Monody on the Death of Sheridan; and began Manfred.[1]

It has been said that in relation to the other dramas, "Manfred lies apart in style and date."[2] The main reason for saying this is that it was written (in part) under Shelley's influence. Though Byron said that Shelley had no part in the writing of the work, it certainly would not be what it is if he had not been in contact with Shelley.[3]

The fact that Byron undertook a drama at this particular time is significant, and two reasons can be given to explain this. In the first place, we may safely assume that Samuel C. Chew is correct in saying that Werner, which, it will be recalled, was begun a few months prior to

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[1] Ernest H. Coleridge, editor, Poetry of Lord Byron, IV, 79.

[2] Herbert Read, Byron, p. 30.

[3] Brandes, IV, 301.

Manfred, was an attempt to reform the English stage.[4] He had begun to try his hand at drama, and his first attempt was still fresh in his mind.

In the second place, we must consider the very subject matter of the play: Manfred, alone in the Alps, invokes the seven Spirits of the Universe because he wants to forget some dreadful event in which his beloved Astarte has been crushed. We do not have to go very far in commentaries on the play to find Astarte to be Augusta and Byron to be Manfred. Manfred's sadness comes from having broken Astarte's heart. It did not take long for a London newspaper, The Day and New Times, to come out with a review stating that Manfred, personifying Byron, was exiled because he had committed incest.[5] There is, of course, no substantiation of this assumption. "Astarte's" heart could have been broken in another way just as well--perhaps it could have been from sadness over Byron's failure in his marriage, for her interest in his welfare was very great. At any rate, one of Byron's reasons for writing this drama was unquestionably a catharsis of what his mind was so filled with at this time. Therefore, we may safely assume that he is truly Manfred, and that Augusta is Astarte, whatever might be the reason for her heart being broken by him.

There is an incantation in Act I, Scene 1 of the drama in which a mysterious voice speaks at some length to Manfred of haunting him,

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[4] Erdman, p. 230, quoting Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 32.

[5] Marchand, II, 699.

saying:

> Though thy slumber may be deep,
> Yet thy Spirit shall not sleep. . . .

This is undoubtedly the unpleasant memory of Lady Byron speaking to him.

It might be added that the impressions of the Bernese Alps which Byron formed during his tour with Hobhouse (September 17-27) were still fresh in his mind, which fact can logically account for the Alpine setting of the drama. As will be shown later, critical opinions varied, but Allardyce Nicoll, after calling Manfred Byron's weakest drama, admits that "nowhere had Byron so fully expressed. . .his appreciaion of the grandeur of Nature's solitary spaces."[6]

Although it is not my purpose to interpret symbolism in the dramas of Byron, it can be readily seen that Manfred is one of his most personal plays, and the autobiographical portions which have been mentioned are obvious to anyone familiar at all with the major events of the poet's life which immediately precede the writing of Manfred. Not only commentators on this particular drama, but Lady Byron as well, admitted this personal aspect. The Reverend Frederick Robertson wrote to Lady Byron years after Manfred was published and asked her if "Manfred shadow[ed] a truth?" She replied, "My silence has of course confirmed your supposition."[7]

Byron did not write this drama as a single unit. He probably wrote the first two acts in Geneva, and the third after he got to Venice. In

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[6] Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama, p. 315.

[7] Mayne, Life of Lady Byron, p. 404.

a letter to Murray of March 9, 1817, he speaks of "remitting the third act of the sort of dramatic poem of which you will by this time have received the first two."[8]

The third act was not considered worthy of publication, and some time elapsed before he revised it. On April 29 he left for Rome, and there he revised the third act in about a week, for he sent the revision to England, "the greater part rewitten," on May 5. Manfred, a Dramatic Poem, was published on June 16, 1817.[9] Calvert, in comparing the first draft of the third act to the second, says that with the revised act "the drama is given a significance which it lacked before. The first two acts point toward the third."[10] He also mentions that the third act in its original form made the drama "not good for anything." It has been suggested that Byron's "inspiration was gone," because he had left Switzerland, and consequently the new environment of Venice did not inspire him to unify this work.[11]

In considering the form of Manfred it seems that the theatrical experience which he had gained from Drury Lane[12] was certainly not ex-

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[8] Letters and Journals, IV, 68.

[9] Poetry, IV, 80.

[10] Calvert, p. 143.

[11] Frances Winwar, The Romantic Rebels, p. 333.

[12] See Calvert, p. 154.

hibited here. He now seemed to think of the English stage in an entirely different light. To consider Manfred an acting play by conventional critical standards would be absurd. In a letter to Murray (April 19, 1817) he insists, "You must call it 'a poem,' for it is no drama. I do not wish to have it called by so Sotheby-ish a name--anything but a green-room Synonime."[13] If Byron thought of Manfred as "a poem," it was certainly interpreted differently by many others. As a matter of fact, it was acted as late as 1873 on a London stage.

Byron's evident reason for saying this was that, in the words of Samuel C. Chew, "England had slapped him in the face."[14] For Byron to have called the work a drama and then have "ta'en a hurt" would have been fatal to his pride. He was here, as always, protecting his most prized possession: himself. At least he had a better chance of a favorable acceptance by calling Manfred "a poem."

As was the case with the reactions to all Byron's dramas, opinions were greatly divided. It was called "a work of genius and originality." Another critique stated that "the central and consistent character was wanting."[15] Also, critics immediately began to accuse Byron of

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[13] Letters and Journals, IV, 100.

[14] Erdman, p. 230, quoting Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 32.

[15] For an informative, succint collection of critiques of Byron's works, see Charles Wells Moulton, editor, The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, IV, 750-751.

plagiarism, maintaining that Manfred was taken from Marlowe's and Goethe's treatment of the Faust legend. In reply to an article by John Wilson in the Edinburgh Monthly Magazine, which accused Manfred of being borrowed from Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, Byron stated that the only knowledge he had of that "magical personage" Faustus was from a verbal translation which Matthew "Monk" Gregory Lewis had rendered the previous summer.[16]

Goethe thought that Byron had used his Faust as a model and complimented the use the latter made of the story.[17] Byron was vindictive in his retaliation to this accusation. He wrote to Murray: "The devil may take both the Faustuses, German and English, I have taken neither."[18] He went further to say that the "germs" of Manfred could be found in a journal which he had sent his sister before he had left Switzerland. However, he had eagerly awaited the reviews and was pleased with most of them.

But in spite of Byron's efforts to clear himself of charges of plagiarism, the obvious parallel still remains between Manfred and the Faust pieces of Goethe and Marlowe, and the evidence is inescapable. This does not imply that Byron was consciously lying. Perhaps the influence of the other two works was an unconscious influence when he

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[16] Letters and Journals, IV, 174.

[17] Poetry, IV, 81.

[18] Letters and Journals, IV, 177.

wrote Manfred, for it seems probable that he would have been familiar with Marlowe's play. Certainly he would have come in contact with it either at Harrow or in the five years he spent at Cambridge. Considering the state of upheaval which his mind must have been in at the time he wrote Manfred, it is possible that he would not have concentrated on a definite model, but might have been unconsciously influenced. Also, the fact that he admitted having heard part of Goethe's Faust translated, is sufficient indication of his familiarity, though slight it might have been with the story.

This thesis reveals many instances where Byron made unsuccessful attempts to thwart opinions both critical and public, and this is very possibly another such instance.

Manfred epitomizes the difficulty of drawing a distinction between "poetic drama" and "dramatic poetry" where Byron's poetic works are concerned. We have already considered the impotence of his emphatic request to "call it a poem." It was definitely taken to be a "dramatic poem" at first, but it was brought to the stage on October 29, 1834, and, as has already been stated, was played, though sporadically, until 1873.

Byron was one of the favorite authors of Robert Schumann, the German composer. Schumann wrote an overture and incidental music and choruses to accompany Manfred (op. 115). He later stated: "I never devoted myself to any composition with such lavish love and power as to 'Manfred.'"[19]

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[19] Joan Chissell, Schumann, pp. 195-197.

Thus, it is apparent that Manfred is a singular drama so far as its subject matter and the conditions under which it was written are concerned. Also, it should be noted that the date of its composition is isolated from the rest of the dramas. From the time Manfred appeared in June, 1817, it was almost three years before Byron undertook another tragedy. This decline of histrionic effort was parallelled by a return to Childe Harold, of which he had completed three Cantos. Byron was now living in Venice and was in the midst of the gaities of that city. He turned to, and became engrossed in two things which consumed a good portion of this three-year period: the writing of much satire (e.g. Beppo, and the first few Cantos of Don Juan), and an extended love affair with the Countess Guiccioli.

It should not be assumed that Byron's interest in the drama was completely dormant, however, for even before Manfred had been completed, he wrote Murray on February 25, 1817, asking him to send an account of Doge Faliero, which could be found in "Dr. Moore's View of Italy," and ended the letter by saying, "I wish to write a tragedy upon the subject, which appears to me very dramatic."[20] Later, in inquiring after the information, which had not come, he said of it, "The devil himself couldn't have a finer subject."[21] On October 12, he acknowledged re-

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[20] Letters and Journals, IV, 58-59.

[21] Ibid., IV, 92.

ceiving it.[22]

So it is definite that the subject was in his thoughts during this interim between Manfred and the rest of the plays.

Byron met the Countess Guiccioli on January 20, 1819. Between that date and October 29, 1821, when he left Ravenna to join her at Pisa, ensued one of the most fruitful periods of his literary career. If he ever loved any woman truly, it was the Countess. What is more, she is perhaps the only woman he ever obeyed. He was living with the Countess at Ravenna and writing the Fifth Canto of Don Juan, when the Countess interrupted his work. She had read a French translation of part of the poem and had thought it "a detestable production." She did not like the idea of making fun of traditional romance, for she thought the religion of love supreme in the world.[23] So "in default of Don Juan,"[24] he turned to tragedies. Not only had the idea for Marino Faliero been in his mind since before his first "drama" had been published, but during his sojourn in Italy he had been in contact with the plays of Alfieri, an Italian playwright. This was perhaps what induced him to undertake another drama. As Pope sought correctness in poetry, Byron, under the influence of Alfieri, sought a correctness in his plays, which meant a strict following of the Greek--the same models that Pope had designated

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[22] Ibid., IV, 171.

[23] André Maurois, Bryon, p. 445.

[24] Ibid., p. 446.

for correctness in poetry. In the works of Alfieri he found this. By turning to an influence foreign to that which he had been accustomed in England, Byron was producing something which was very different from what "rough audiences" and "vulgar tastes" had been experiencing in his own country. It would follow that if a playwright wanted to succeed in his work, he should write something to appeal to current taste. But this Byron did not do. Just how much he loved success has already been shown. Now he wanted success as much as ever, but he wanted something in addition: a reformation of the English stage. It has been said that the instincts and aims of Byron and Alfieri were alike, but that the conditions they faced were different. Alfieri derived his classicism via the French, who were still holding onto classical vestiges in their theatre, but all this was gone from the English theatre which Byron had to face.[25] This did not stop his egotistical idealism, however, for he blandly admitted,

> It appears to me that there is room for a different style of the drama; neither a servile following of the old drama, which is a grossly erroneous one, nor yet too French, like those who succeeded the older writers. It appears to me, that good English, and a severer approach to the rules, might combine something not dishonorable to our literature. I have also attempted to make a play without love. And there are neither rings, nor mistakes, nor starts, nor outrageous ranting villains, nor melodrama, in it. . . . Whatever faults it has will arise from deficiency in the conduct, rather than in the conception.[26]

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[25] Calvert, p. 162.

[26] Ibid., p. 164, quoting Letters and Journals, V, 243-44. The italics are mine.

Byron believed that this new drama which was "studiously Greek" would regularize the contemporary English drama: "I want to make a regular English drama, no matter whether for the stage or not."[27] Byron spent three months writing Marino Faliero, and a final draft was sent to England on October 6. However, in his lengthy preface to the play he stated that he had "no view to the stage."[28] This, of course, was to protect his pride against the possibility of an injury. But what it was impossible for him to foresee was that the fate of Marino Faliero in England was destined to undermine these wishes.

In the same preface he stated that for four years he had "meditated this work." The preface itself shows the intricacies involved in the creation of the main character and of establishing the correct historical facts for a background. He had once made the statement, "I hate all things fiction,"[29] and in Marino Faliero we find more than ample reason to bewail the fact that he does. I have been unable to discover a single detail of the story that he did not incorporate in the play itself. He seemed to desire a history book in dialogue form. It is definitely the single direction of plot that makes the play so laborious. The story is simply the story

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[27] Letters and Journals, V, 347.

[28] Poetry, IV, 337.

[29] Marchand, II, 687.

of Marino Faliero, an aged Doge of Venice, who joins in a conspiracy to overthrow the "Council of the Ten"; who are actually running the government and ruining the Republic, making him powerless to help the situation. The conspiracy is exposed by conscientious Bertram; Marino is taken by "The Ten" and beheaded.

Byron, in his adherence to the unities, is as extreme as was Addison in Cato. In Byron's play, the whole of the action takes place after the conspiracy is formed, because of "the desire of preserving, though still too remote, a nearer approach to unity."[30] What is left is little more than a documentary account of the remainder of the history.

Commentators have mentioned that Marino Faliero and The Two Foscari "honor the spirit of rebellion."[31] It has also been said that "they are plays with a passionate political purpose. . . their aim was to. . . excite the lethargic Italian patriots to unanimous revolt against their oppressors. . . . They belong rather to Romance than to English literature."[32] These commentaries give a more logical purpose than that which Byron had in mind, and so far as the Italian drama of that time was concerned, they would have met the requirements sufficiently. But, as has been shown, that was not what Byron wanted to do.

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[30] Poetry, IV, 340.

[31] John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, p. 343.

[32] Brandes, p. 329.

The play in its final draft, "all the acts corrected," was received in England some days before October 6, 1820. Early in January, 1821, an announcement reached Byron that Robert William Elliston was going to produce Marino Faliero at Drury Lane.[33]

Byron's reply was immediate and sharp. He wrote Murray to protest "stoutly and publicly (if it be necessary), against any attempt to bring the tragedy on any stage. It was written solely for the reader."[34] He even included a written protest to be published if the need arose, stating that "By no kind of adaptation can it be made fit for the present English stage."

From this point he began to expose the invalidity of his argument that he was not writing for the stage. On the very same day he wrote another letter to Murray stating that "Kemble or Kean could read it."[35]

Here he was letting the barrier down just enough to reveal that he would like to have the play given recognition. But he kept sending protests to London, and finally, on Wednesday, April 25, an injunction was obtained from the Lord Chancellor, only half an hour after Elliston had received the formal licence for production from the Lord Chamberlain. The injunction required that the play be immediately withdrawn.[36] But

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[33] Poetry, IV, 328.

[34] Letters and Journals, V, 221.

[35] Ibid., V, 223.

[36] Mayne, Byron, p. 353.

Elliston pursued the Lord Chancellor to the steps of his own house, and persuaded him to let the play be given on that night only. When Murray heard of this new development, he issued a handbill which explained the whole affair. The play was produced and failed miserably. It was acted again on April 30, and on five dates in May, but it never stimulated any great amount of interest.[37]

To anyone familiar at all with the English theatre the work immediately recalls Otway's Venice Preserved, and certainly Allardyce Nicoll is correct in saying that "it wants power because of this fact."[38] Nicoll also mentions the fact that the play is like many of the earlier chronicle histories, because Byron, like the authors of these works, "allows stage direction to do what should have been done in dialogue or by hearsay."[39]

Critical opinions were once again divided. Reginald Heber called the subject "ill-chosen"; Paul Elmer More later said that the play "may be cited as a fair example of his eloquence and concentrated passion."[40]

However, Byron's reaction to the staging of the play is far more significant than that of the critics who criticized it after reading it.

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[37] Idib., p. 354.

[38] Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660-1900 p. 169.

[39] Idem.

[40] The Library of Literary Criticism, IV, 753.

The course which Byron pursued is one which definitely tells us that he had been false in stating that it was not his wish to write for the stage. It had been shortly before January 11 that Byron had learned that plans were being made to act Marino Faliero in London, for on January 11 he wrote his sharp reply telling Murray to squelch the attempt.[41] Two days later he wrote in his diary, "Sketched the outline and Drams. Pers. of an intended tragedy of Sardanapalus, which I have for some time meditated."[42]

This causes one to raise a significant question: Why would an author, with a play in danger of being hissed off the stage, want to begin immediately a new drama which might meet the same fate? Byron, despite all the safety measures he had taken to save embarrassment in case Marino Faliero should be damned, could not have really contemplated such damnation. If he had, it would be impossible to explain why he wrote in his diary on January 26 that he had "pondered the subjects of four tragedies to be written." They were: (1) Sardanapalus, ("already begun"); (2) Cain ("a metaphysical subject, something in the style of Manfred, but in five acts"); (3) Francesca of Rimini ("in five acts"); and (4) Tiberius.[43] At this point, his plan, which required success as its incentive, was under way. He must definitely have felt

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[41] See p. 35, note 34.

[42] Letters and Journals, V, 172.

[43] Ibid.

that future dramas stood a good chance of succeeding.

He continued working on Saradanapalus at a rather leisurely pace. He did not complete it until May 27, and in the meantime the performance of Marino Faliero took place. Countess Guiccioli, his amica, wrote of him during this period,

> His quiet was, in spite of himself often disturbed by public events, and by the attacks which, principally in his character of author, the journals levelled at him. In vain did he protest that he was indifferent to these attacks. The impression was, it is true, but momentary: and he, from a feeling of noble pride, but too much disdained to reply to his detractors. But, however brief his annoyance was, it was sufficiently acute to occasion him much pain, and to afflict those who loved him. Every occurrence relative to the bringing of Marino Faliero on the stage caused him excessive inquietude.[44]

Five performances of the drama were presented during the first two weeks of May, and several Italian papers carried the story that "Lord Byron had exposed his tragedy of M[arino] F[aliero]" and that it had been "universally hissed." On May 17, only three days after the final performance, Byron sent to his friend Richard Hoppner one of his most revealing letters on the subject of this drama. In it, he condemned the Italian newspapers on two counts: (1) that he had opposed the presentation, and (2) that it was not hissed, "but is continued to be acted, in spite of the Author, publisher, and the Lord Chancellor's injunction."[45] From this it is obvious that Byron was attempting to save

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[44] Ibid., p. 294 n.

[45] Ibid., p. 288.

face in any event, and that while he was under the impression that a successful presentation was taking place, he was perfectly willing to accept it.

This fact is further substantiated by a letter to Murray two days later in which he again expresses belief that the play was not hissed, and asks Murray:

> I should like to know what compensation Mr. Elliston could make me, not only for dragging my writings on the stage in five days, but for being the cause that I was kept for four days. . .in the belief that the tragedy had been acted and 'unanimously hissed;' and this with the addition that 'I had brought it upon the stage,' and consequently that none of my friends had attended to my request on the contrary. Suppose I had burst a blood vessel, like John Keats. . . . At present I am, luckily, calmer than I used to be, and yet I would not pass those four days over again for--I know not what.[46]

He was beginning to clutch this "success" close to his ego. In the same letter (May 19) he mentioned that he had completed three acts of another tragedy, "intending to complete it in five." On the 28th, he wrote to Murray that he had completed it. He had written the last two acts in ten days. It had taken him over four months to write the first three. The reason for such acceleration at this particular time speaks for itself, of course.

This tragedy was Sardanapalus, the story of an effeminate, sensual King of Assyria who undergoes a reformation of character when his country is overrun by the Medes. The life of Byron at the Palazzo Mocenigo has been compared to that of Sardanapalus before the latter's

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[46] Ibid., p. 290.

change of character.[47] Sardanapalus' change is inspired primarily by the love of Myrrha, his favorite mistress. The theme of love was strongly suggested by the Countess Guiccioli.[48] Sardanapalus was greatly influenced by the Countess' suggestion, just as Byron often was.

The packets containing Sardanapalus had been enroute to London only twelve days when Byron, once again with great gusto, undertook another drama. It was The Two Foscari, another story in a Venetian setting, which like Marino Faliero dealt with an actual event. Though historical fallacies have been noted,[49] his adherance to the unities is still apparent. He completed The Two Foscari in record time. He had begun it on June 12; it was completed on July 9. On June 29, he had expressed his ignorance of how Marino Faliero was faring at that time in a letter to Murray. In the same letter he stated that he was in the "third act of a third drama," and he was anxious to hear of the public reaction for, if "coldness from the public and hestitation from [Murray] " were all that were due his efforts, "it were better to break off in time."[50] He had planned to go on, however, "as far as [his] mind would carry [him] ," but if the experiment he was attempting were impractical, "it were better to say so at

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[47] Mayne, Byron, p. 446.

[48] Marchand, II, 897.

[49] See Poetry, pp. 326-327.

[50] Letters and Journals, V, 313.

once."[51]

But Byron was egoist enough to think that the public's reaction would be favorable, and in little more than a week he had finished the drama. In exactly one week (on July 16) he began still another drama: Cain: A Mystery. However, from this date until Cain was completed (September 9) he made no mention of this new drama in his correspondence.

Why Byron made no mention of the progress of Cain is not apparent, but most probably he had received word from England concerning the failure of Marino Faliero. He gives a weak defence in the form of a vindication in a letter to Murray, dated August 23. After saying that the public did not understand that his "dramatic simplicity" was "studiously Greek," he rationalized that "no reform ever succeeded at first."[52] This is ample evidence that he had been disappointed in his suppositions. His reply was certainly a weak one, for as Nichol has said, if a Greek dramatist had said that his drama was not for the stage, he would be confessing failure.[53]

Whether Byron made any changes in the text of Cain after he received the unwelcome news cannot be ascertained, but in his preface he makes no mention of its stage-worthiness. Instead, he seems deliber-

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[51] Idem.

[52] Ibid., p. 347.

[53] Nichol, p. 143.

ately to make it impossible for the stage by making Cain and Lucifer fly through the universe, by the etheral setting of the main action, and by a myriad of speeches which are much too long. He mentioned in the letter which accompanied Cain to England that it contained "some poetry, being in the style of Manfred."[54] However, he had insisted vigorously that Manfred was not be be staged, perhaps because he realised that it might have been possible, but with Cain staging would be unthinkable, and it is probable that he consciously made it so. Like Manfred, Cain is in only three acts--too short for performance, and it is like Manfred in that abstract entities are employed to articulate an idea, or state of mind. Manfred as an entity is known to us only vaguely; the thing that we are concerned with is the dreadful memory which haunts his mind. In brief, he was merely incidental to the idea which he exemplified (i.e. the impossibility of escaping from some heinous crime). With Cain the idea is much more nebulous than in Manfred, and the characters are unimaginatively reshaped from another context. The play is definitely not religious; it is metaphysical. The Biblical setting and characters serve only as a vehicle to discuss such questions as predestination, free will, fate, and the responsibility for evil, which he like to argue.[55] This seems a fair enough analysis, as most of the action is simply a debate be-

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[54] Letters and Journals, V, 360.

[55] Marchand, II, 917.

tween Cain and Lucifer. Byron mentions in the preface to Cain that he has partly adopted the notion of Cuvier that the world had been destroyed several times before man's creation. Lucifer says that the pre-Adamite beings were much more intelligent than men. It is also Byron's thesis that man was damned before the fall. After the fall (which is where the action begins), Cain refuses to praise Jehovah by saying,

> The tree was planted, and why not for him?
> If not, why place him near it, where it grew,
> The fairest in the centre?

Byron never gives any definite solution to the questions which are raised; they are merely voiced. Karl Elze described Byron in this play as being a lion in a cage of dogma: "He remains in a state of indecision, and never comes to a positive conclusion in either direction."[56] Cain kills Abel, and is branded by the Angel of the Lord, but good does not triumph. Cain still does not admit that he has committed a serious crime, and in the end of the final act he does not repent of his wrong, but merely bemoans the curse that has been put upon him.

This misuse of a Biblical story was criticized sharply. Not only was it attacked from religious conservatives, but it was reprimanded from a literary point of view also. Lord Jeffrey, in the Edinburgh Review, prophesied that it would scandalize and offend pious persons in general. Maginn, in Blackwood's Magazine was equally biting, but for a different reason. He thought that Byron was trying in vain to measure

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[56] The Library of Literary Criticism, IV, 754. quoting Karl Elze, Lord Byron, p. 415.

himself with Milton. He said that this audacious insult to the faith and feelings of a Christian land was one of the most feeble and ineffectual, and that it was too radically dull to be popular even among the radicals.

On September 4 Byron had informed Kinnaird that he intended to dedicate The Two Foscari to Sir Walter Scott, Sardanapalus to Goethe, and succeeding editions of Marino Faliero to Kinnaird himself. But in a letter to Murray dated September 10, which accompanied the manuscript of Cain, he asked that the dedication be changed to Scott. He evidently foresaw an unfavorable reaction from the critics and the public, and thought that Scott's approval would make the work more acceptable to those minds.[57] Scott heartily agreed, writing to Murray, "I. . . know that his muse has never taken so lofty a flight amid her former soarings."[58] Equally enthusiastic was Goethe, always Byron's avid admirer, who said that, "Its beauty is such as we shall not see a second time in the world."[59]

In the middle of February Byron wrote Moore that "the parsons were preaching of it from Kentish town and Oxford to Pisa."[60] This

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[57] Marchand, II, 930.

[58] Poetry, V, 208.

[59] Ibid., p. 204.

[60] Letters and Journals, VI, 24.

vigorous controversy caused him to despair, and later the same year he wrote in Don Juan, XI, lvi, 1-2:

> But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero
> My Leipsic, and My Mont Saint Jean
> seems Cain.

This was, of course, admitting a kind of defeat, but the negative arguments brought against the drama were mainly centered around its shocking religious properties, rather than its dramatic flaws. Perhaps, as has been mentioned, Byron deliberately contrived it so that he would not have to attempt the stage again. As one commentator stated, it "is an intransigent version of the Mediaeval Cain plays. The fourteenth Century would have considered it the work of the devil."[61] When Murray asked him to make some alterations in certain passages, he replied that he could not do so without making Lucifer talk like the Bishop of Lincoln, and then he asked "who was ever altered by a poem?"[62] Perhaps Byron's works cannot always be credited as being successful, but it can certainly be said of him that once he published anything, he supported it faithfully. However, he was prudent enough in his next drama to give some balm to the public's wound which Cain had inflicted. A few days after Byron had sent the new "drama" (i.e. Heaven and Earth) to Murray, he sent a letter stating that he thought it would be found "pious enough."

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[61] Gassner, Masters of the Drama, p. 344.

[62] Letters and Journals, V, 469-470.

Little needs to be said about Heaven and Earth. As it stands, it is a dramatic nonentity. Byron did not divide it into acts because it was longer and more of a Greek or lyrical nature than he had intended. Instead, he chose to divide it into "parts" with scenes. He only completed one "part," and told Murray that one "part" could be published as the whole, or that it could be continued in a way he had in view.[63] But it was never continued. It was finally published in The Liberal on January 1, 1823.

It was begun at Ravenna on October 9, exactly one month after Cain was completed. Byron spent only about two weeks composing it. The story is taken from Genesis, and concerns the intermarriage of the "sons of God" with the "daughters of Men."[64] The action takes place just before the great flood. Japheth, one of Noah's sons, ponders why he is left safe from the waters, while others are being swept away.

On October 9, the day that Heaven and Earth was begun, Byron had written to Murray requesting the first act of Werner, which he had begun in 1815, while on the Committee of Drury Lane. He also asked Murray to cut out the "German's Tale" from the Canterbury Tales of Harriet and Sophia Lee. "Kruitzner, or the German's Tale," by Harriet Lee was published in volume IV of the Canterbury Tales in 1801. Byron saw it shortly after its appearance, and, as he confesses in the pre-

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63 Ibid., p. 474.

64 Poetry, V, 280.

face to Werner, he began a drama on the subject "called 'Ulric and Ilvina,' which I had sense enough to burn." Byron was only thirteen at the time. As Hobhouse was unable to find the 1815 draft, Byron began the drama a third time. The 1815 draft was later found and came into Murray's possession. In comparing this early draft (two scenes of Act 1), one may be thankful that Byron did not have access to it in 1821. It is far less mature than the 1821 draft, and its lack of restraint marks it as amateurish. In its finished form the play was subtitled The Inheritance. It deals with Siegendorf, assuming the name of Werner, who has been banished by his father because of his marriage to Josephine, daughter of "a wandering foreign exile." However, Siegendorf stands to inherit his father's title and lands, and Stralenheim, next of kin after Siegendorf, wishes to eliminate the latter, which is the reason why Siegendorf takes the assumed name. Stralenheim is enroute to claim the inheritance after the old man's death, but is almost drowned during a flood. He is saved by Ulric, who is Siegendorf's son, whom Siegendorf has not seen for a number of years. Stralenheim is mysteriously murdered, and all believe a Hungarian named Gabor to be the culprit. However, after Siegendorf has claimed his rightful legacy, Gabor returns and places the guilt where it belongs--on Ulric.

In the 1815 draft the action is poorly calculated. There is no conception of conflict in these opening scenes; not enough information is given about the characters to warrant any conflict.

The finished version is different, however, in many respects. Not only is it a structural improvement over the earlier draft, but it

differs from all the rest of Byron's dramas as well. In the first place, he has abandoned his close adherence to the unities. This change is so marked that it is practically a revolt from his ealier theory of writing in the spirit of the Greeks. In the second place, the drama is quite in the spirit of what the English theatres were producing at the time and, what is more important, is undoubtedly better. All the melodramatic Gothic elements are present, which would of course have appealed to an audience in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, but Byron showed good artistic discretion with the final scene of the play. Instead of a horrible ending, where Ulric conceivably might have killed his father, he simply leaves his father and mother to lament the fact that his actions were the result of a father's weakness and sensuality. The psychological effect is powerful and enhances the effectiveness of the play because of its restraint.[65] When compared to his other dramas, the success of Werner is remarkable. It has been suggested that Byron wrote this play deliberately with his tongue in his cheek in order to create a drama bad enough to please the tastes of his time--that he "patently surrendered his ideals in favor of a theatrical taste which he dispised."[66] Whether or not this assumption is entirely true, we have no way of knowing, but the ideals were

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[65] Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660-1900, IV, 170.

[66] Marchand, III, Notes, p. 117 quoting T. H. Vail Motter, "Byron's Werner Re-estimated: A Neglected Chapter in Nineteenth Century Stage History," in Murray's Magazine.

altered, and the audience was wooed.

The published version of Werner appeared on November 22, 1822. Kinnaird reported: "This day Werner is out. Murray has a Sale of a Dinner, & ere this has probably sold some thousand Copies." Four days later he wrote: "Murray--whom I saw yesterday--says he has sold Six Thousand Copies of Werner."[67]

Byron, undoubtedly sensing the stageworthiness of Werner, took his usual precaution by stating in the preface that "the whole is neither intended, nor in any shape adapted for the stage." But its stage success was astounding. Surprisingly, Werner made its stage debut in New York, at the Park Theatre, in 1826. It was brought out at Drury Lane in 1830, with William Charles Macready in the title role. Macready kept the part of Werner alive until his retirement, in 1851.[68] It was acted in various countries, and there are records of performances as late as 1887. A successful performance of a Byronic drama was never given during his lifetime.

There remains but one "drama," The Deformed Transformed, an incomplete work of which there are only two "parts" and the chorus of a third. It is often mentioned by commentators, and rightly so, that Byron himself was the central figure of his dramas,[69] and this is most

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[67] Marchand, III, 1048.

[68] See Sir Frederick Pollock, editor, Macready's Reminiscences, p. 657.

[69] See Calvert, p. 180.

obvious in this fragment. The plot is simply the story of a deformed boy, a hunchback, who has received ill treatment at the hands of a cruel mother and makes a compact with a spirit who promises to change his shape and give him the power he has wished for. The action gradually moves to the siege and sack of Rome in 1537. But more than anything else, this is the story of Byron as a boy. As Mary Shelley said, "This had long been a favorite--subject with Lord Byron. . . . No action of Lord Byron's life--scarce a line he has written--but was influenced by his personal defect."[70] Byron told Mary Shelley that the "whole conduct" of the poem was conceived, but he never finished it.

It was written at Pisa in 1822, and although the specific month is not known, it can be reasonably supposed that late spring or early summer would have been the time.

The advertisement preceding the fragment mentions that the story was taken in part from The Three Brothers, a novel by Joshua Pickersgill, Jr., and partly from the Faust of the "great Goethe." Medwin relates that when Byron gave the manuscript to Shelley for perusal and asked him how he liked it, the latter replied, "Least of anything I ever saw of yours. It is a bad imitation of Faust."[71]

Its importance is negligible, and it does not warrant further reading except to say that it is interesting today only because of the

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[70] Poetry, V, 474.

[71] Letters and Journals, V, 518.

fact that it is autobiographical and that it bears some relation to Goethe's Faust.

Thus, Byron's career as a playwright ended on a low level. Perhaps his poetic will was tired at this point, or perhaps when his inspiration for these dramas abated, there was nothing else to replace it.[72] At any rate, he had returned to Don Juan in January of 1822, before he had started The Deformed Transformed, and in that year Don Juan was his main project. Don Juan certainly offered a more flexible form to follow than what the drama had afforded.[73]

As has already been pointed out, Byron admitted a sort of defeat when in Don Juan he called Cain his "Mont Saint Jean." Viewing the chronology of the plays, we see that after Cain there remained but the two fragments and Werner. Although Werner might be considered his finest play, it was decidedly different from the dreams with which he had intended to regularize the English stage. If we are to accept the fact that he was seriously trying to reform the stage with a new drama, (and I think it can be safely said that he was), we cannot consider Werner truly "Byronic" in its structure. For Werner was certainly not changed to fit Byron's standards, but for once Byron changed to meet the demands of the English. Therefore, when we consider Werner not typical of Byron's dramatic style, little remains after Cain. He gave ground

[72] Calvert, pp. 180-181.

[73] Ibid., p. 182.

when Heaven and Earth was published, allowing whole passages to be omitted and the name of one character to be changed, and, needless to say, he gave still more ground with Werner.

The tragedies were really more romantic than Byron was and they disappointed his English readers. Even historical subjects became agents of self-liberation in his hands.[74] He was disappointed and disillusioned. One of the last recorded references Byron ever made to his dramas was when he was on his way to Greece and his death. He had made friends with Dr. James Kennedy, an English medical officer. His remark shows his disillusionment: "I am tired of tragedies, having so completely failed in them, as they say."[75]

It is in a way fortunate that Byron was brought to feel this way. The dramas are perhaps less read today than any other part of his work. Neither have they ever been seriously associated with the English stage. Thus, if Byron had attempted any more drama, it is a good chance that he would have continued to waste time that might have been spent on more important poetic activity,[76] for there were less than two years remaining in his life.

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[74] Maurois, pp. 448-450.

[75] Calvert, p. 168, quoting James Kennedy, Conversations on Religion With Lord Byron and Others, p. 277.

[76] Drinkwater, pp. 311-312.

## CHAPTER THREE

## BYRON AND THE DRAMA OF HIS AGE

The hundreds of plays which filled the shelves of Drury Lane while Byron was a committeeman give an insight into the state of the drama of Byron's day. One of his responsibilities as a committeeman was to read some five hundred plays which had been submitted for presentation. For the most part, their authors were unknown, but they nevertheless saw a possibility of having their efforts performed. These were spectacular, gaudy plays which audiences were demanding. Theatres had become so large that they resembled indoor arenas, and consequently performances containing spectacular scenes were especially suited to these stages.

Theatre managers were still intent on preserving as much respect for the art as possible, but all they had in the way of better plays were by the older English dramatists. Even Goldsmith and Sheridan could not be produced, because the theatres were much too large. The drawing room comedy which these men had written required a small theatre where the audience could be in intimate contact with the actors. But intimacy in such houses was a thing of the past.

Needless to say, theatrical producers of the time were in a predicament which promised little change. If any respect for drama were to be preserved, they could not produce plays such as those mentioned by Byron, and yet they still had to please their audiences.

For a solution they turned to the most logical source: the con-

temporary poets. The dearth of good drama was counterbalanced by a wealth of fine poetry, and it was thought that writers who had gained success with their poetry might be equally successful in writing for the stage. A number of these poets made attempts to hold the stage and, indeed, many were proclaimed master dramatists. But each one who was given such praise saw his success grow fainter and fainter.[1] The acclaim given to these writers was not so much genuine critical enthusiasm as a desire to find something to praise.[2] Not one of the Romantic poets produced a work of real value as drama with the possible exception of Shelley's The Cenci.

What makes the situation even more appalling is that there was a wealth of fine actors and acresses at this time who could have successfully performed new works of merit, had such works been forthcoming. Edmund Kean and Mrs. Sarah Siddons are two good examples.[3]

There are various reasons why these poets failed to produce an enduring drama. The flamboyant taste of the audiences was in direct opposition to the poets' inclination toward solitariness. The reaction of the two upon each other drove them apart, and gradually the poets came to despise the stage. The spectators could find no joy in the highly subjective type of drama that the poets were putting before them,

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[1] See "Detached Thoughts," Letters and Journals, V, 442-444.

[2] Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660-1900, p. 166.

[3] Allardyce Nicoll, World Drama from Aeschylus to Anouilh, p. 412.

and consequently there developed an almost complete schism between literature and the playhouse.[4] Also, the poets were saturated with the works of Shakespeare, and their dramas showed this influence. Shakespeare was not appreciated by the average audience of Byron's day; consequently poets who imitated Shakespeare's style were not appreciated by their own age.[5]

These poets undoubtedly saw in the drama a means for the revelation of character and feeling offered by dialogue, but were unable to adapt their styles to the exacting conditions of actual performance.[6] Indeed, one possible reason for the failure of so many of these dramas is that the poets' conception of character was not brought out clearly enough in the dramatic form, or that it was too subtle. It has been wisely stated that the great dramatist does not write for readers, but for spectators.[7]

These poets came to the drama through literature rather than by way of the stage, and for this reason they lacked essential theatrical savoir-faire. But what is regrettable is that these poets could not successfully meet the countless demands of actual stage presentation.

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[4] Clayton Hamilton, The Theory of the Theatre, p. 19.

[5] John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, p. 343.

[6] Sheldon Cheney, The Theatre, p. 416.

[7] Idem.

Neither would they acknowledge that literature is not the only thing in the theatre. In short, the poets did not have a true passion for the theatre, but for themselves.[8]

Although outside theatrical influences are often blamed for the poets' failure, many of these influences could have been overcome, and in the end the poets had but themselves to blame.[9] As a retort to any excuse that might be offered in the poets' behalf, Allardyce Nicoll has wryly said, "After all, greater dramatists in the past have accepted the conditions of their own times. The Elizabethan theatre was in no state of perfection when Shakespeare wrote. . . ."[10]

As a writer living in this age, Byron was subject to the same conditions that the other poets were, and, in most cases, he can be criticized for similar faults.

Nicoll has given three reasons why Byron's dramas fail to reach true greatness:

> (1) Byron's preoccupation with Byron. Like all Romantic poets, Byron was an individualist--one might say an egoist. For this reason it was difficult for him to pass beyond himself to see the world and men objectively. And certainly drama demands objective treatment.
>
> (2) The familiar disdain of the contemporary stage. Byron was associated with the stage, and yet he "looked

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[8] Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1600-1900, p. 207.

[9] Ibid., p. 63.

[10] Ibid., p. 60.

upon it from the height of his overweening personality and the dignified seclusion of the House of Lords.

(3) The preoccupation with themes ill-calculated to express the spirit of the age.

He, like the others, looked backward instead of forward for material, and by so doing failed to capture the spirit of his own age.[11]

Goethe observed that Shakespeare's influence on Byron is perhaps not as well known as his influence on certain other poets. It was Goethe's opinion that Byron made it a point not to show the influence of Shakespeare because, according to Goethe, Shakespeare was far superior to Byron where pure individuality was concerned, and Byron realized this superiority. Goethe thought that Byron would have denied Shakespeare altogether, for Shakespeare's cheerfulness was in his way, and he knew that he was no match for it.[12] Of course, it was not unusual for Byron to decry anything or anybody that made him feel uncomfortable. But he was often unconvincing in his denunciations, because the basis for many of them was his own inadequacy, which was perfectly obvious to others. By decrying Shakespeare's influence Byron laid himself open to this criticism. A well annotated edition of Byron's letters or poetic works will reveal expressions, phrases, even whole lines taken from Shakespeare. This fact alone is proof that Byron had a thorough knowledge of Shakespeare, and that he was unconsciously influenced by him.

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[11] Ibid., pp. 168-169.

[12] Library of Literary Criticism, IV, 757.

But Byron liked to claim that his drama was a return to the spirit of Greek drama. Being a professed admirer of Greek drama, he very probably turned to it now as a safe refuge, since associating himself with Shakespeare made him feel inferior.

Thus, Byron can be classified with the rest of the Romantic poets who attempted to write drama in that, like them, he despised theatrical conditions of his day, was interested mostly in himself, and was very much conditioned by the style of Shakespeare. However, the comparison falters when we try to say that he did not understand the theatre.

His association with the theatre was admittedly not the type which might produce a polished playwright, but even at that, he was associated with the stage more intimately than were his contemporaries, and he was therefore in a position to know what was being accepted by audiences. The very fact that Werner was successful on the stage is sufficient indication that he could have written for the stage if he had wanted to. The situation was this: Byron undoubtedly understood the basic demands of the English stage, but thought them beneath him, so he turned away from the stage--not because he was incapable of writing for it, but since he found it impossible to revolutionize it, he was not interested in writing for it in the condition in which it stood.

At this point Byron can once again be associated with his contemporaries, for they all looked to something better. But where Byron differs from the rest is that he could have met the requirements if he would. The fact that he did not write for these vulgar tastes was

simply a matter of his own choosing.

Most criticisms of Byron's dramas employ theatrical standards of his own day as a criterion. When his dramas are weighed in those terms, they are found wanting. However, his efforts might have been more widely accepted in an earlier age like the first half of the eighteenth century, when a return to classical models was appreciated and advocated. But by Byron's time the rule of the Augustans was dead.[13] Therefore, it is in a sense unfair to judge Byron by the standards of his own age, since he was not attempting to meet them.

Most of the Romantic poets who attempted to write drama were unsuccessful in character projection. Byron, like all the other Romantic poets, put his own character forward in his dramas, but he was the only one of them who had the makings of a real dramatic hero. The type of hero that he represents has been compared to those created by Marlowe two centuries before. Byron, like those heroes, had colossal aspirations. Indeed, he "had in him the stuff of which great drama is made."[14]

In some plays this heroic character is very powerful. However, this is not true in Cain and Manfred, where, as has already been mentioned, the central figures of these dramas are overshadowed by the idea, or state of mind which they exemplify. But in the three

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[13] Nicoll, British Drama, p. 309.

[14] Ibid., pp. 314-315.

"classical" tragedies, (i.e. Marino Faliero, Sardanapalus, and The Two Foscari), the main character is Byron, in various expressions of his complex personality.[15] And certainly he can be forgiven for the weakness of the heroes of Cain and Manfred when one considers the strength of character exhibited by the heroes of the "classical" tragedies.

Byron's life was full of tragedy, and although it is logical to think that the greatest tragedy of his life might be his separation from Lady Byron, the ensuing scandal, and his moral banishment from his homeland, perhaps Garrod is correct in saying that the greatest tragedy of his life came during the time that the majority of the plays were written (1818-24). "For," says Garrod, "there is no such tragedy as virtues brief and unfortunate."[16] Byron was living in Italy at this time and his virtue (what there was of it) was certainly brief and frequently unfortunate.

By all odds, Byron should have been a much more successful dramatist than he was. As has been shown, the time was right (the theatres were crying out for good dramas); he was better equipped than any of his contemporaries to emerge as the great dramatist of his age; and he was a personality of the sort required to be projected dramatically. It should not be said that Byron did not try to fill this place. For two years, at the height of his maturity, he poured forth his full

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[15] Calvert, p. 181.

[16] Garrod, p. 20.

measure of genius and passion toward it.[17] Not only did he want applause, but he wanted to revolutionize the English stage with his own dramatic concepts. Even though he did not achieve success in the eyes of critics, his dramas were more popular than those of any other Romantic poet.[18] However, this is saying very little when success is considered in the full sense of the word, even though Werner is adequate proof that Byron was capable of succeeding on the stage. All the other dramas were different, and all can be deemed failures. However, it is significant as it is honorable that Byron did not sell his high dramatic ideals for the paltry price of success on the English stage of his day.

But after defending Byron for not stooping to achieve success on the English stage, and possibly giving him credit as writer of a type of classical drama superior to the average drama of his day, one might conceivably raise this question: "How successful are Byron's dramas when criticized in terms of drama in general?" When Byron the playwright is evaluated in these terms, one is justified in calling him a failure. Even if his dramas were compared to similar efforts of the eighteenth century, they would be judged inferior. Although his main characters reach greater proportions of epic greatness than those created by his contemporaties, and although he had more contact with the theatre than they had, his over-all achievement as a dramatist must be compared with

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[17] Drinkwater, p. 311.

[18] Nicoll, British Drama, p. 314.

theirs. In any age it is necessary for a poet to realize that being a poet is one thing, but being a dramatist is quite another.

The dramas of Byron form an erratic pattern: Werner was begun first, and it was definitely intended for the stage. This intention was interrupted by events which plagued his mind to the point that he undertook another drama (Manfred) as a sort of catharsis. It was three years before he began his "regular" or "classical" drama. He knew that this drama might actually be staged, but as he was not sure of how it would be accepted, he said that it was not intended for the stage. But when staging was attempted, he was so fascinated by the idea of presentation that he immediately cast two more dramas in the same mold. He was working on still another (Cain) when he found that this type of drama was not going to succeed on the stage and so he made Cain unactable. After that he wrote two fragments and one more completed drama (Werner) which was so different from anything he had written before that its authorship has been questioned.

Actually, then, he wrote only three "regular" dramas which were "studiously Greek"—Marino Faliero, Sardanapalus, and The Two Foscari. The rest fall into no pattern at all, but are "individual expressions." Therefore, these "regular" dramas may be considered the norm of his dramatic output. After he found this "norm" to be unsuccessful on the stage, he tried to protect it by saying that it was intended for a "mental theatre."[19] It would follow, then, that this would place his dramas in a category with his poetry, since they are

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[19] Letters and Journals, V, 347.

all poetic. In being so placed, the dramas are debased, for where does one of these dramas stand when compared to poems like Don Juan and Childe Harold? The dramas are perhaps less read than any other segment of his work.[20]

Byron's dramas, then, were not only unsuccessful on the stage of his own day, but, like those of his contemporaries, unsuccessful by any dramatic standards. Even when compared to the whole of Byron's poetry, they are found inferior.

[20] See p. 57, n. 76.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## CONCLUSION

After considering Byron's relation to the theatre as an amateur actor and committeeman, viewing his dramatic concepts, and comparing him to other poets of his own day who attempted dramas, it can be clearly seen that both from an acting and a literary standpoint, his dramas are of an inferior quality. There can be no doubt of Byron's disappointment and disillusionment, as he had devoted so much time and energy at the prime of his life to them. At first he had said that this work was not for the stage, wishing all the time that he might capture the stage. For this reason the statements in the prefaces of Marino Faliero, Sardanapalus, and Werner concerning his not writing for the stage may be regarded as untrue. However, it is definite that he did not have the stage in mind when he wrote Manfred and Cain. The length of these pieces and the abstractness of the characters indicate that he did not have in mind the same goal that he did with the "regular" dramas and with Werner. The stageworthiness of the fragments need not be considered, of course.

He at all times protected himself from possible failure. This can be seen by the statements in the above-mentioned prefaces and by his contention that he was writing for a "mental theatre."

His entire career as a playwright is characterized by two aspects of his complex personality: the artist and the egoist. He wrote something which he thought was artistically superior, and he protected it

with his very sensitive ego. He made an excuse for every failure, and after he had finished Werner, his last completed drama, he made an excuse which is an attempt to smoothe over the failure he had experienced with the drama and at this time felt so strongly. After Werner was published, there was found a mutilated page of manuscript which had been intended to accompany the preface of that play. It was attached to the final sentence, which reads: "The whole is neither intended, nor in any shape adapted for the stage." The addition (reads) as follows:

> . . . . Of England or any other country. It may seem unnecessary to add this, but having seen a poem of mine never intended for representation, dragged in spite of my remonstrance upon the theatres of more than one nation. I trust it will not be deemed impertinent if I once more repeat my protest against [a gross] folly which may injure me--and [benefit] no one. If it be understood that all dramatic writing is generically intended for the stage, I deny it. With the exception of Shakespeare (or Tate, Cibber, and Thompson under his name), not one in fifty plays of our dramatists is ever acted, however much they may be read. Only one of Massinger--none of Ford--none of Marlowe, one of Ben Jonson--none of Webster, none of Heywood, and, even in comedy, Congreve is rarely acted, and that is only one of his plays. Neither is Joanna Baillie. I am far from attempting to raise myself to a level with the least of these names--I only wish to be [exempted] from a stage which is not theirs. . . .[1]

Byron had once begun a comedy "and burnt it because the scene ran into reality."[2] It was difficult for him to face the reality of failure, just as it was difficult for him to face any reality. The reason the above quotation was omitted from the preface when the

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[1] Matthew Arnold, Essays in Criticism, p. 366.

[2] Read Byron, p. 25.

play was published is not known, but very possibly it was because he kept it back purposely. To have printed it would have been much worse than to admit failure to himself--he would have been admitting it to the public, and failure in the eye of the public, to whom he had always considered himself superior, would have been impossible to bear.

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